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If learning is a social process, where does Web 2.0 fit in?

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The first time I heard a lecture on Web 2.0 was in April 2006 at a “WEBIST” conference in Portugal. At the time, I don’t think I quite understood what this new phase of the web meant, except that it was a collection of software that allowed for collaborative publishing. The speaker kept talking about the “user” having taken over the web and creating online content.

Today, the word “2.0” has caught on like fire: Learning 2.0, Teaching 2.0, Business 2.0, Enterprise 2.0; PR 2.0, Media 2.0, Classroom 2.0, Campus 2.0 etc. While I will not go into the etymology of the word, suffice it to say that the phrase “Web 2.0” describes a significant transition in the use of the Internet as it went from a global “information” space to a more “social”, “collaborative” and “participatory” space. Users have taken over and are “creating” content, collaborating, communicating and forming professional and social networks like never before.

What has made this possible? It is the emergence of a number of Web-based services and applications which are collectively called “social software” (blogs, wikis, social bookmarking sites, RSS feeds, social network sites like *Facebook*, media sites like *YouTube* and *Flickr*, etc) whose main characteristic is that they are user friendly and that many of them are free.

“In Web 2.0, the software recedes into the background...it has to be very easy to use because the slightest hurdle may cause the user to abandon it for something else” (Vassileva, 199-214)

This means that online content can be created by anybody without the specialized skills once needed to create a webpage. Users have been transformed into consumers and producers of web content.

As individuals, many of us have kept up with and are adopting some of these new technologies for our personal use. Even AUC has embraced “podcasting” and “YouTube” as the software of choice to disseminate AUC activities to the outside world, and has made available applications like “Google docs” and “Google sites” (a wiki application) for the AUC community to use.

The questions I am posing here focus on the implications of this technological shift for education: Has education kept up with this shift? Should it? In what way does it help facilitate learning? What are the challenges and what are opportunities?

If you have followed the discourse taking place in educational circles or in our CLT workshops/meetings, it is clear that a significant shift has occurred in the teaching and learning landscape. The following table briefly summarizes this change¹.

Teaching and Learning Landscape									
OLD	Teacher centered	Individual Learning	Isolated Classrooms	Text based	Physical library	Subject centered curriculum	Commercial Platforms (i.e. Blackboard)	Information Technology	University Based
NEW	Student Centered	Collaborative Learning	Physical/Virtual Learning Spaces	Multi-media experience	Digital Library	Inter-disciplinary Curriculum	Open Source Web 2.0	Information Literacy	Life-long Learning

Our role as teachers however still remains the same: we are there to guide the learning experience and to facilitate the students' relationship with the discipline. And yet we need to rethink how we do it because what has worked in the past may no longer be helpful.

Most university courses and curricula are designed based on learning theories of the 1900-1960's and are essentially content-driven, lecture-based and teacher-centered. Our biggest challenge today is to design courses that are truly student-centered, that take into account the challenges of a globalized, information-centered world and that address the needs of a generation of students who has grown up in a digital environment all their lives (the so-called Net Gen students).

So does Web 2.0 fit in all of this? The answer is "yes" with the usual caveat: like any other technology, the use of Web 2.0 technologies should be driven by specific learning goals.

My friend and colleague, Pandeli Glavanis often quotes Emile Durkheim ("*The social power of ideas stems from their development through the interaction of many minds*") to emphasize that learning is a social process. If nothing else, Web 2.0 applications allow for this "interaction of many minds". They are the tools of choice to help learners connect, communicate and collaborate.

A growing number of college instructors are discovering that these tools provide innovative teaching and learning opportunities that mirror current approaches to learning. The challenge is figuring out how to incorporate these paradigm-altering technologies to achieve the outcomes we seek. If this is something that interests you, sign up for CLT's Web 2.0 crash course and join the discourse.

Sources

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¹ Adapted from Carmel McNaught's presentation WEBIST-2006 conference by A. Ellozy

Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to: aellozy@aucegypt.edu and/or pandeli@aucegypt.edu